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AUTHOR Jacobson, Mark D.
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ABSTRACT

C. Dweck (1983) suggested that children hold one of two types of beliefs in their own intelligence: a fixed entity with which they are born (entity theory) or a belief that intelligence can be changed over time (incremental theory). These two beliefs were studied through the responses of 22 second graders and observations of their behavior. The relationship between the children's beliefs and their motivation was also studied in relation to the public (classroom) setting, the teacher, and the task. Findings suggest that many children do not see learning as an incremental process and do not set learning goals. The challenge for the teacher is to develop a classroom in which all students operate within a "learning goals" orientation and see learning as an incremental process. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

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I Feel Like I'm the Dumbest in the Class

Effort, Persistence, and Achievement Motivation in The Classroom

Paper Prepared for
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By
Mark D. Jacobson
The Edward Devotion School
345 Harvard St.
Brookline, Massachusetts 02446
mark_jacobson@brookline.mec.edu

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Introduction

Research is a journey, as is teaching. Four years ago the two paths joined as I took my first step into the world of teacher/research. Until then I had not read a journal article since the time I studied psychology as an undergraduate 20 years ago. Reading research was not a requirement of my graduate program in education, and it is not within the culture of teaching.

For years I have been interested in the inner dialog that occurs in children's minds. What are children's own perceptions of themselves and how does it affect their learning? How do they think about their own learning, success and failures?

My first research question was "How do children define themselves in terms of their own intelligence?"

I began with the research literature. I went to the local university library and searched for articles, carried them down to the machines, copied them and read them. It was an adjustment reading journal articles, learning the language and style.

I soon learned of the achievement motivation literature. It encompasses a vastly rich body of work; work that is profoundly connected to teaching and learning. It is striking to me, however, that there lacks a bridge between the theory embodied in this work and that of teaching practice. I have attempted to build such a bridge for my own professional development, and particularly to improve my teaching and the motivation of the children whom I serve.

Carol Dweck's work particularly captures my imagination. In her findings she discovered that people hold one of two theories of what intelligence is. Try this survey to get a sense of how it works:

Establishing Your Own Theory Of Intelligence

Please rate the following 3 statements on the scale of:

1 = strongly agree... to... 6 = strongly disagree

___Your intelligence is something about you that you can't change very much.

___You have a certain amount of intelligence and you really can't do much to change it.

___You can learn new things but you can't really change your basic intelligence.

___If I knew I wasn't going to do well at a task, I probably wouldn't do it even if I might learn a lot from it.

___Although I hate to admit it, I sometimes would rather do well in a class than learn a lot.

___It's much more important for me to learn things in my classes than it is to get the best grades.

Then average your six responses:_____ **Above 3 = Incremental Below 4 = Entity**

Dweck found that children develop one of two theories of intelligence. One is called **entity** in which one believes that a person has a fixed amount of intelligence - a given entity, and it cannot change. This type of person thinks that they are born with a given amount of smartness which cannot be altered. The other theory is **incremental** in which your intelligence can change over time with effort in incremental steps. If a child is an entity theorist and believes that she or he is not smart then he or she may develop a pattern of what is called learned helplessness. These are the children who believe they are not smart and that their "non-smartness" is fixed.

Although these findings were a major revelation to me as a teacher, what I find even more profound is Dweck's (Dweck & Bempechat, 1983) theory that children who hold either of these two theories, likewise hold certain goals for learning. (See Appendix I and II)

Dweck & Bempechat (1983) say that "the same tasks that maximize learning are often the ones that are poor tasks for looking smart and vice versa. (Make them out of the public eye and they can be both, i.e. maximum learning, and the entity learners can experience learning incrementally without the burden of needing to look smart/to perform.) When they come into conflict (the two goals) children will choose one over the other depending on their own entity/incremental tendency.

Tasks suitable for learning are often ones that are difficult, involve errors, confusion, revelations of ignorance, and require a lengthy presolution period.

Tasks best suited for performance goals are ones that appear to be difficult or are difficult for others, but are relatively easy for the individual- tasks that yield rapid solutions with little effort, or at least tasks on which one is fairly certain one can outperform others."

Dweck (1991) found that the maladaptive pattern included:

1. a heightened concern with outcomes and judgments (vs. effort and progress).
2. a heightened reaction to negative outcomes and judgments, such that these terminated and defined the episode as a failure, eradicated both passed and future successes, and led to the abandonment of constructive goals (vs. a view of negative outcomes or judgments as a point in time between pat and future successes).

3. A tendency to draw general inferences about important characteristics of the self from a small sample of outcomes or feedback (vs. a tendency to view outcomes and feedback as information to be used constructively).
4. a tendency to hold implicit theories that depict important characteristics of the self as immutable (vs. as qualities that can be changed or developed).

For children seeking to learn something that they do not know, periods of uncertainty may be seen as inevitable and as stimulating or challenging, whereas for children seeking competence judgments, periods of uncertainty might be seen as fraught with peril of errors and failure. Thus children with learning goals would seek tasks that maximize learning, even if they are likely to make errors and thereby advertise their present lack of proficiency; children with performance goals would sacrifice learning tasks in favor of tasks that maximize competence judgments.

In order to facilitate learning, children with learning goals would seek accurate information about their abilities. This would help them structure proper instruction, plan strategies, set appropriate standards, and the like. In contrast, children seeking to obtain positive and avoid negative competence judgments are by definition seeking flattering information about their abilities and they may avoid diagnosing deficits even when this jeopardizes their future outcomes. One might say that children with learning goals are interested in results, not in excuses; children with performance goals may opt for the latter.

Because learning goals involve competence increases, children's standards are more likely to be personal (increases judged with respect to their own initial level). In contrast, because performance goals involve looking smart, standards are more likely to be normative. Performance goals are more likely to involve the immediate application of standards against which competence judgments are made. Learning goals are more likely to involve skill increases over longer periods of time and hence standards are more apt to be longer-term, more flexible ones. In addition. learning and performance standards carry different implications for nonattainment. Performance standards often have an all-or-nothing quality: if children fall short of their standards, they may well perceive themselves as having missed the boat. In contrast, for learning goals, partial attainment may have considerable value. That is, even if children fail to reach the standard they have set, they may still be pleased with their increased skill or knowledge. Thus learning goals may be less tyrannical than performance goals in terms of whether and when they are attained.

Further, when one considers a child's expectancy of meeting personal, long-term, flexible learning standards, the expectancy depends in large part on how much time and effort the child is willing to exert. However, when one considers more normative, immediate, rigid performance standards, the child's expectancy depends to a greater extent on some assessment of his or her ability at the moment (Dweck & Elliott, 1983).

Effort and persistence are greater when people believe that the potential to control the outcomes lies within themselves rather than in external factors that they cannot control (Stipek & Weisz, 1981; Thomas, 1980).

I have pondered these findings and continue to contemplate the means by which I can apply them in my present second grade classroom (and former third grade). I began collecting my data with a series of questionnaires. As I read them over I noticed that they were not accurately reflecting who these kids are. Some of the questions were: What *does it mean to be smart? Do you think you are smart? Can all people get smarter?*

> Journal Entry 2-13-97
> I think I have made an important discovery. In reading the responses to the questionnaires I have discovered that many of the children have not answered as I would have expected. Their answers were more reflective of what they think should be said than the way they actually behave. They may truly believe their responses, but I have seen evidence to the contrary. I think this discovery is of critical importance: 1. because if I am in fact receiving information as supposed "results" but it is not "true" then the results are flawed, 2. if this is true in my study is it true in others'? 3. and perhaps most importantly - I know these kids quite well. My familiarity with them is what allowed me to make this discovery. Had I not known these children and took their responses at face value I would be looking at the children differently, and, I believe, inaccurately. This shows me the great value in being the researcher and teacher.

Consequently:

> One day two weeks ago I took a group of the 5 "learned helpless" children into a private room with a tape recorder and interviewed them about this "I can't do it" thinking. The children opened up in ways I had never witnessed before. They spoke candidly about their true feelings of fear and their true beliefs of helplessness. They vividly explained why, when, and how they feel helpless. It was something about this format that seemed to allow the kids the safety to respond fully and openly. I think the support of one another helped tremendously.

I wondered about how one gets accurate information with unfamiliar children when doing research. I also wanted to look much more deeply into the role that entity and incremental thinking play in children's motivational patterns. I tried several things.

First, I asked the class to rate themselves on a scale from 1-22, as to where each child believes he or she belongs in the class on 13 separate categories, such as reading, writing, math facts, sports, etc. 1 means the best, 22 the worst in the class, since I had 22 children (see Appendix III).

I was not particularly looking at gender differences at that time but the results of this survey forced me to.

This flagged something important to me. Gender differences in achievement motivation in school begin much earlier than I had realized. That was with my third graders. This past year, and

presently, I surveyed my second graders every two months in the same way. I have found some differences in gender. This leads me to theorize that something significant is happening in relation to gender and achievement between second and third grade.

Nicholls (1978) found that 4-5 year olds view intellectual ability as being unlimited. "The harder I try the smarter I'll get." As early as second grade, however, children begin to perceive ability as a fixed trait that, by it's very nature, limits what they can accomplish. At this point children begin agreeing with statements such as "The harder I have to try, the dumber I must be." Nicholls refers to this change over time as a progression from belief in ability as "mastery through effort" to the belief as ability "as capacity," that is, limited by what children perceive a an upper limit on their intelligence. (Brophy, 1998)

Another method that I use is a ring toss game. Each child in turn is asked to choose a taped off location between 1 and 12 feet from the post. They are asked to predict how many of the 4 rings they will get on the post. Now, I'd like to ask you to think about this for yourself. If the goal is to get as many rings on as possible, where would you stand?

The purpose of this activity is to teach the children, and to inform myself, of their own attitudes and hidden beliefs about their own capabilities. If a child chooses to stand at 1 foot they are being safe, it's a sure thing, but it is not challenging. Likewise if a child chooses somewhere between 9 and 12 feet, it is also a sure thing, the certainty being they will not get any rings on but they will not look bad either. (remember that entity thinkers are concerned with performance goals - they avoid looking incompetent). In my discussion with the children following this event we talked of a "learning zone," an area within which one is challenged but also able to experience success, differentiating between easy, challenging, and too hard.

How does success occur in a classroom, who determines if something is successful, and how is it measured? And how can I, as a teacher provide the atmosphere, the classroom culture, and the curriculum that foster achievement?

Learning is what you think. or, as a great sage once said: *Whatever you think, so you become.*

> **Brenda**: I feel like I'm not good in math and get scared. I feel like I'm the dumbest in the class in math.
>
> **Mr. J** (myself): In just math or other things too?
>
> **Brenda**: Other things too.

Mr. J: How true do you think that is?

Brenda: I don't know.

Mr. J: Why do you feel that way?

Brenda: I can't do as much as other people.

Mr. J: When you start math what do you tell yourself?

Brenda: I can't do it, I'm scared.

Mr. J: What if you couldn't do it?

Brenda: I wouldn't be smart in that subject. I should be able to do it. I'm scared that people will tease me.

Mr. J: What would it look like if you were smart?

Brenda: I'd be a fast thinker, quick learner, the first time I try things I'd get it right.

Mr. J: What does trying have to do with it?

Brenda: If I try hard and get it right I feel smart. I'm afraid the math was going to be too hard.

Mr. J: What do you tell yourself when I tell you you are better than you think in math?

Brenda: I don't believe you.

Mr. J: Do you want to change?

Brenda: Yes, but how? How am I going to change my thinking?

As Brenda asks, "How am I going to change my thinking?" I ask "How am I going to help her change her thinking?" I operate on the premise that, barring any physiological, or other disabling obstacles to learning, all children have the potential to achieve, to exert effort, to persist, and to experience school success. Further, I have come to see that the obstacles to learning that I witness in children daily are those that are self imposed, unconscious, thinking that motivate them to exert less effort and to give up rather than persist. It is their thinking, i.e. their belief system that sees opportunities as obstacles to learning.

In the course of my research I have discovered three main arenas within which these children tend to exert little effort and persistence when faced with obstacles, while others are motivated to learn. The areas are in relation to the teacher, the publicness of the classroom, and the tasks.

What is motivation? It is a desire to learn and a desire to try to learn new things, and to give effort to the process of learning. A lack of effort and persistence is a lack of motivation

It often takes lots of hard work and lots of tries and lots of time and lots of mistakes before something is learned" (pg 59 Brophy).

We send kids to school and expect them to learn and assume that if we send them in and give them information and do good teaching of information, they will get it. But, as I have come to see, and as over thirty years of research have come to show, if a child is not motivated to learn s/he will not. As I have come to learn how to see through the lens of their beliefs, I have seen the obstacles that children encounter. My goal is to help them over, to the other side, to experience learning as a joyful challenge.

Obstacles To Effort And Persistence

In Relation To The Public Setting

When children enter the schoolhouse door it is as if they climb on stage. Their days are filled with performances, often spontaneous, unrehearsed, unexpected. And they are expected to perform. We need to become much more cognizant of this and the public performance anxiety (PPA) that children consequently experience.

When a child is put on stage a period of uncertainty may exist. For children seeking competence judgments, periods of uncertainty might be seen as fraught with peril of errors and failure (Dweck & Elliott, 1983). With obstacles as pronounced as these, it is no wonder that children do not give effort.

When children are in a group there are many who consistently do not ask for help when needed. They do not say that they do not understand, even if asked, and they leave the group to begin a task without understanding what the directions are. They do not want to admit publicly that they do not know something. It is a matter of appearance. Being in the public eye triggers the avoidance response.

Avoiding participation = avoiding failure. Children are frequently expected to participate in a group in the classroom. Understanding performance goals gives insight to those who often do not participate.

Children experience much fear of being wrong/making mistakes. This is especially true in the public eye. Children have their own perceptions of what a mistake is. Many are not accustomed to open ended dialog. If they already perceive the world in terms of right and wrong, they will fear that any of their thinking is potentially incorrect; there is not room for ponder and wonder. Thinking is not a process for these children, it is a means of coming to the "right answer." This parallels the

notion that entity kids want to look smart and perform towards that goal while incremental kids want to get smart and work/behave accordingly.

> 2-12-98
> De'Tisha is reading her story to the class during the sharing component of Writing Workshop. I blow my nose. She stops and looks up at me as if I had laughed at her. It is a similar sound to laughter.
>
> Then a few children give her suggestions for her story. Their tone is pleasant and unassuming (by my standards). "I think I'll throw this away" she says. De'Tisha took the suggestions as criticism. She seemed to be thinking that if people thought the story needed changes then it wasn't good enough as it was.

De'Tisha took a risk and felt that she failed. She seemed to feel that she was being made to look bad in the public eyes of her peers.

In the normal course of the school day children are often required to perform, as it were, much more spontaneously. They are asked to think on their feet, come up with their own ideas, their own thinking, their own creations, their own explanations. This could create a climate of fear. I can imagine children going through their day wondering when they will be required to do and say something that they may not feel equipped to do. I think that in my classroom I do far too much of this. I think I need to make my own expectations more clear in terms of the work, its purpose, its goals. The research states that these things must be present for children to improve motivation.

Which child is asking the questions? Who is taking public risks? Who asks for help when needed? Who is willing to say what they think, risking being incorrect? Who admits not understanding? Entity children are the likely ones to be concerned about public appearance. If they want to look smart and avoid looking incompetent, and are keenly aware of being judged, then a fair amount of their classroom life is engaged in maladaptive behavior.

Asking questions is a category of behavior that crosses over from the public to teacher to task. Either asking questions as a means of avoidance or not asking both provide evidence of obstacles to effort and persistence. "If I ask a lot of questions I won't have to begin." "I need to ask a lot of questions to be sure I know what to do because I feel very uncertain about whether or not I could do this." "I won't ask any questions because I will be perceived as dumb." (by teacher and/or peers if in public).

There are times when the children complete an assignment in which the product is a story or some other written piece. I occasionally ask them to individually read their work to the class. I have noticed that there are those who are eager to share, those who need some coaxing, and those who refuse. Some will allow me to read it aloud, and those who will not even allow that to occur.

2-2-98
I have begun to keep records of where each child falls within these categories. I continue to notice how the public aspect of the classroom impacts on children's behavior. Courtney was a child who did not want to read her food chain story to the class. I was able to convince her to allow me to read it aloud. David has big behavior issues, particularly related to power and control. He is often testing authority. When given the opportunity to be in the spotlight, though, he said no, and was finally convinced to allow me to read it.

I continue to notice an interesting difference in public behavior when it comes to drama and singing. The seemingly shyest of kids will sing a solo and be incredibly dramatic in front of the class, while not wanting to read a piece of their own work. Yesterday I saw evidence of this when I asked kids to do a skit in front of the class. One person was to play the role of a child at home who just made a mistake on his/her homework. The other was to be the parent. I was amazed at Sophie and Charlie, who become melodramatic in their role as the child and dominated the scene. Sophie is a child who usually sits silently in class meeting, not offering her thoughts unless drawn out of her. David played a very shy parent. Justin was the most animated I'd ever seen him.

I told my wife about this phenomena and she said "I know what that's about. I was like that too. When you are on stage you aren't yourself, you don't have to be you. You are something or someone else." This makes sense. Put a child in the role of themselves as student in a classroom and they fall into conditioned behaviors. Give them someone else to be and they can go wild.

12-22-97
Ari is a very reticent child who literally and figuratively hides behind others. When given a solo part to sing Ari in a holiday performance Ari volunteered unhesitantly. He knew what he had to do, it was clear, concrete, rehearsed, memorized.

In Ari's mind it must have been a sure thing, not fraught with the peril of error and failure.

It is oftentimes the case that when a child gives a response publicly, others or another exclaim disgust that they were not the one to say it. It is as though they wanted credit and another received it instead. It seems to be a cultural belief that one does not attribute self credit unless it is honored or acknowledged publicly. Do incremental kids more often tell themselves that "I thought of that too, so I am also to be credited and I too am smart"?

Children are ultra-sensitive to the most subtle of things that can and do affect their sense of safety and their achievement beliefs. I believe that many of the seemingly insignificant occurrences in a classroom can actually be a big deal to a child - certain children anyway.

Children often say "I don't know" or "Never mind" or "Forget it". Until I began this research I believed them. My radar is now out when I hear these utterances. I question the face value of the statement. It is often an avoidance or a giving up. I tend to stay with a this child, easing her/him into persevering.

3-10-98
I have also noticed that some of the kids rarely participate unless I insist. Betsy (Inclusion teacher) asked the question: "What is a short vowel?" and a bunch of kids did not raise their hand.

> We were talking about rules at lunch and recess and a bunch of kids, again, did not offer their thoughts. I know they know the answer. What is that? The public element of learning seems to be a factor. If a child has performance goals (wants to look competent and avoid looking incompetent) then it makes sense that these same kids would avoid participation unless it is a sure thing. These same kids did do a singing solo at our performances for the parents.

The manner in which children participate, perform, and avoid in the classroom is a reflection of their sense of self in regard to ability/intelligence and therefore self-esteem. Their public performance is determined by what they think.

The Obstacles To Effort And Persistence
In Relation To The Teacher

Much of a child's school day is spent in the public arena, and the most prominent, influential person that they spend it with is the teacher. I have been thinking a lot about the relationship between the teacher and the student. It is becoming increasingly obvious to me that the relationship is at the heart of the child's success. One could know all the research, have a lot of data, yet still not be successful with a child if there is a negative, (or very little of a) relationship.

What do I mean by relationship? I mean the understanding that the teacher has of the child, the feeling between them, the level of relating that occurs, the degree to which the child trusts the teacher and feels safe to be vulnerable, to make mistakes and be OK with them.

Cazden (1988) speaks of the "different purposes of talk" and "control of the right to speak." The teacher is usually the one to make the rules, to determine the purpose of talk and controls who has the right to speak. The teacher chooses the percentage of talk that is of the "right answer" variety vs. open ended and therefore controls the performance.

The teacher can have a great deal of knowledge about the child in the abstract but have no real way of being with the child.

"What?" - Teacher Seen As Judge

Children are always looking to us for reassurance. The slightest utterance or facial change could signal to them that they are wrong. In class meetings it is often the case that I do not hear what a child says the first time s/he states it. I used to say: "What?" meaning- "what did you say?" I noticed that the child would often say something like: "Never mind" or "I forgot." I realized that they were hearing my "what?" as a statement of their incorrectness. Now in these situations I am in the habit of saying: "I can't hear you" or nonverbally put my hand to my hear indicating that I cannot hear. The "what" motif occurs quite often in my classroom daily. It is a constant reminder that what children say and what they are thinking are often quite different messages.

"Earning Points" - More Powerful Than Teacher As Judge

2-17-97
The children get team points if I "catch" them sitting in the circle together when they are supposed to be there in a timely way.

Mr. J: "Freeze. Raise your hand if your whole team is sitting in the circle."

Shonna quickly moves over and sits.

Privately I ask her:

Mr. J: Were you trying to trick me?

Shonna: No, I was trying to get a point.

Mr. J: But that's not how you get it. You have to earn it, OK?

Shonna: OK.

Shonna wants the point by any means.

In reexamining this it occurs to me that I was interpreting Shonna's behavior in terms of what she was doing to **me.** In fact it had nothing to do with me. When she said "No, I was trying to get a point" it jolted me to reality. Of course. If I offer points as an incentive, why think a child's behavior in trying to achieve the goals is in relation to the teacher? I think teachers do this all the time. We set up situations where the children want something and then their behavior, from their perspective, is perfectly appropriate in setting out to achieve what they want. But we misinterpret and see their behavior in terms of how they are being defiant or in some way hurting us.

This was a situation in which I was "the judge" but misjudged what I thought I was seeing.

Earning points- extrinsic goals-performance goals-willing to trick teacher at risk of being caught to earn points - a powerful motivation, but for the wrong reasons and the wrong way.

"Am I in Trouble?" - Teacher Seen As Punisher

I see how my relationship with the children is so important that it is easy to underestimate the power of my presence in the classroom. I called Michael from across the room in what I considered a friendly, innocuous tone. He looked up in fear and came over asking: "Am I in trouble?" I was helping Ben with his jobs as leader-of-the-day. I asked him to come over and he asked: "Are you mad at me?" Both situations bewildered me. Did I really sound that way? Is it just the calling over part that created the fear in children? Is it the same as with adult experiences with authorities? To this day if I happen to see a police officer my first reaction is fear. My first thought is: "Am I doing anything wrong.?" I'm then relieved when I realize I am safe.

1-15-97
Kids continue to show me that they are worried and afraid when I call them over, even when I use the most innocuous, gentle voice.

I asked today: "Who thinks that if I call you , you think you're in trouble?" More than half the hands went up.

2-10-98
Mr. J: The reason I wanted to meet with you guys was because you all have something in common. Do you know what "have something in common" means?

James: No.

Mr. J : Well, there is some behavior and feelings that I've noticed in all of you. I wonder if anybody here could figure out what that is. Liam?

Liam: I was wondering? Just like everybody here, you just want to be sure you are doing the right thing, so you're a little bit worried. Is that it?

Mr. J : You mean you're all worried?

Liam: Yeah.

Mr. J : That's part of it. Yeah. Say more about that.

Liam: Um. Well, we're all worrying that we can't do it and we're all worrying that we're not doing the right thing.

Mr. J : Do you all agree with Liam that you are all like that? Shonna?

Shonna: Yeah.

Mr. J : Sandy?

Sandy: Yeah.

Mr. J : Uh huh, uh huh. (me acknowledging others responses)

Who else wants to make some comments about that? Shonna.

Shonna: Mm, maybe because everybody...if you call on them they maybe think they're in trouble.

Mr. J : They what?

Shonna: They maybe think they're in trouble.

Mr. J : They maybe think they're in trouble. Oooh. How many of you feel that way, that if I call on you...you mean like if I call your name?

Shonna: Yeah.

Mr. J : like if I say how many of you thought you were in trouble because I asked you to come into this room?... All of you!? See you were right. You were right. Does that happen a lot?

James: Mmm, no yeah.

Mr. J : Could we talk about that for a minute?

Sandy: Sure

Mr. J : Because I've noticed that with you guys that whenever I call you for something you think you're in trouble. Does that happen also, um, when other people call you.

James: Mm, Yeah.

Mr. J : Like who? James?

James: Like Mrs. Kane or like a boss of school like principal.

Mr. J : Uh huh. Sandy?

Sandy: Not usually, but sometimes Miss Kane because she usually talks like firmly and stuff.

Shonna: Firmly

Mr. J : Do you know what that means?

Shonna: No.

Mr. J : Explain to her.

Sandy: It means like...she talks like, not like she talks like she's mad... like she's angry at someone. She talks like... like that way just not the same way.

Mr. J : Strongly

Sandy: Yeah, strongly

Mr. J : Is that what you mean?
Mmm hmm. And how bout...is there other people who you feel that way with... like your parents maybe?

All: Yeah, yeah.

Mr. J : Liam, how about you? When your parents call you do you feel like you're in trouble?

Liam: Not really but sort of.

Mr. J : And you do?

Sandy: Yeah, when my dad calls me.

Mr. J : When your dad calls you?

Sandy: Oh yeah!

Mr. J : Yeah? Give us...What does it sound like?

Sandy: Sandy come in here!!

Mr. J : That's sounds like you might be in trouble, yeah.

Sandy: (Giggles) But usually I'm not.

Mr. J : Usually you're not but you're afraid you are.

Sandy: Yeah but...

Shonna: This is how my mother says it- Shonna come here right now.

Mr. J : And that makes you think you're in trouble. Does she ever call you nicely but you still think you're in trouble?

Shonna: Yeah like this-Shonna come here.

Mr. J : Mmm hmm. OK.

Shonna: If she calls me sweetie.

Mr. J : Uh huh.

Shonna: I don't like it when she calls me sweetie

Mr. J : When she calls you sweetie?

Shonna: No.

Mr. J : And if she calls you sweetie do you think you're in trouble?

Shonna: No.

Mr. J : Then you think you're not.

Sandy: My dad...my dad talks like that I know I'm not in trouble.

Mr. J : Like what?

Sandy: When my dad talks like Shonna just did.

He says it like "Shonna come here" except he says "Sandy come here."

Mr. J : Right.

Sandy: In a nice way.

Mr. J : Uh huh.

Sandy: So that means I know I'm not in trouble.

"Was It That You Weren't Sure?" - Teacher Seen As Mistake Catcher

2-4-97
Shonna has just typed a story on the computer.

Mr. J: Do you want to illustrate your writing?

Shonna: Illustrate? What does illustrate mean?

Mr. J: You know

Shonna: No I don't

Mr. J: Yes you do.

Shonna: Draw pictures?

Mr. J: Yes! I knew you knew. Why did you say you didn't?

Shonna: I don't know.

Mr. J: Was it that you weren't sure?

Shonna: Yes.

Mr. J: So next time if you aren't sure you could say "I'm not sure instead of I don't know, because when you say 'I don't know" It sounds like you have no idea. And that wasn't true was it?

Shonna: No.

Mr. J: I know that you are smart and that you know a lot of things.

"And you helped me and then I thought it was easy" - Teacher Seen As Recuer

11-12-97
James was working on a math problem. As soon as I walked over to him he gave up. It seemed that my presence was a trigger for his helpless response, as if to think "oh. Mr. J is here so it is time to give up. That is what I do when adults work with me." This a is an intuitive interpretation but I believe an accurate one. James is locked into his behavior. I have been joking with him about being the "I-can't-do-it kid." I'm hoping that humor mixed with a steady dose of talking will help him out of it.

James and I went back to the problem and I asked him to trace it back to the moment that he felt it was "too hard." In fact it was when I walked over. As we looked over the problem, focusing on it and not him, he showed me that he very much understood the problem, what strategy he could use to solve it, but felt a bit overwhelmed at adding up a large series of 15's. We wrote them out in a column. I suggested to James that combining would help. He proceeded to connect groups of two 15's with < and wrote 60's. He continued by combining these until he came to a total. I reminded him that he was, in fact, able to.

12-5-97
Mr. J: Well sometimes it seems like you act like you can't so something when I know that you could do it, right? But other times where there is a suggestion to do something, like um, I don't know, a project, or singing or something and you make a face and say you don't want to do it, right? Why do you think you do that?

James: Hmm. Well, maybe it's just too hard fo...I don't think it's...I think it's too hard.

Mr. J: You think it's too hard?

James: Yeah because last time I thought it was too hard and it was easy and I like it.

Mr. J: Like what? When did that happen?

James: Um, when...Remember I gave up and you came when me and **Liam** were doing the big... and hard math problems?

Mr. J: Yes.

James: and you helped me and then I thought it was easy?

Mr. J: Yes, I remember that.

So, what...did you learn anything from that?

James: Mmm? Yeah, I learned to count and not to give up if its a hard problem.

Mr. J: It seems like you gave up as soon as I walked over. Did me coming over have something to do with you giving up?

James: Mmm, Mmm. I gave up like... a minute ago you came over.

Mr. J: Do you give up more when adults are around you?

James: Mmm. Sometimes.

Mr. J: Why's that?

James: Well just it feels like I'm...it feels that you're gonna help me.

Mr. J: It feels like I'm gonna help you?

James: Yeah.

Mr. J: So if I come over you just wanna like, help...have me start helping you?

James: Yeah.

Mr. J: Mmm, hmm.

Mr. J: Do you like to feel little?

James: What's that?

Mr. J: Young.

James: Yeah.

Mr. J: You do? How come?

James: Because I get to do more stuff that I like.

What is it about the presence of the teacher that elicits a response that in my mind seems unwarranted? My guess is that it is the "conditioning" of the child. Each child has her/his own inner

dialogue going. It may sound like this: "Oh, here comes the teacher so I will be told that I did something wrong. Why else would he be coming over here?" or "Here comes the teacher so I could now fall into my helpless act." I do not in any way believe that these dialogues are occurring consciously. I do believe that we are mostly driven by our unconscious thoughts, though, and this is consistent with that belief.

It looks as though kids categorize themselves early on and hold those beliefs to be true about themselves. Shonna believes that she is a "bad girl" and acts accordingly. If someone does not challenge these beliefs they stay. The longer they stay the stronger they get and the more difficult it is to change them. More and more evidence is given to the child's data collecting system to confirm that these beliefs about themselves are right.

12-4-97
Mr. J: James, slap me five.

James proceeds to give a half-hearted slap on my hand.

Mr. J: Try again with power this time.

Again weak but stronger.

Mr. J: Try again, but even stronger.
This time James gives me a very strong slap.

James enters many things in school with a defeatist attitude. His being oozes discouragement. It is always work on my part to build him up, to encourage him, to catch him at his game and call him on it, to say *you can do better*.

I am looking more and more at myself as a player in this research/story. Over the past two years I have moved more so in that direction as I realize that I (as teacher) influence a great deal of the climate in the classroom community and the climate at any given moment. How can one study success, achievement, motivation, and improvement without scrutinizing the teacher's behaviors and relationships with the children. They are so interconnected that the research can only tell part of any story. I will go further to say that a researcher could not come into my room with the intent of studying my behavior and successfully come away with accurate data because the individual relationships I have with children is subtle and invisible to an outsider, particularly the decisions I make to intervene or not, and the ways I relate to each child. Certainly someone can observe how I set a tone, how I deliver curriculum, how I set up my room, and all the other external factors. But so much remains hidden.

Obstacles To Effort And Persistence

In Relation To The Task

The day in the life of a task

Tasks come in many forms - sizes, shapes, appearances, levels of difficulty and perceived difficulty. Tasks are much of what a child does in school all day. They are the nitty gritty of school work. With them comes all the baggage that a child carries to a task, from its beginning to end.

1. Before Beginning a Task

"Oh good, it's time to learn" vs. "Uh oh, here comes another potential threat to my appearance."

Before students begin a task the teacher is often giving directions. Children are being cued to the fact that a new task is about to begin (see Appendix IV). Children with learning goal will already be asking themselves "How can I do it? What will I learn?" whereas children with performance goals will be asking "Can I do it? Will I look smart?" (Dweck & Elliott, 1983). Entity children have just received their first trigger to give up, so they may move into avoidance behavior. Avoiding a task shows a lack of effort and persistence. In this case it occurs before the task has even begun. My thinking has evolved on this point as my research has.

11-16-97
I think that there are behaviors that children exhibit repeatedly that give us a window into their own failure syndromes. Asking for help seems to be one of those categories. At the beginning of a math session we are often together as a group discussing a concept and getting directions for subsequent work that will be done alone or with partners. I then give the directions and the kids are off to work. Something happens at that time. Inner monologues are occurring. Some are saying it's too hard, or I can't do it, or I'll wait to get help from an adult, or I won't listen to the directions the first time, or if I don't get the directions I won't have to do it. All of these are avoidance behaviors. And there certainly is a "void." The void is the connection between the directions and director, and the receiver. What is the receiver doing and why? I have become very conscious and careful of this time. I prepare myself. I get gentle. I make it OK to ask questions. I repeatedly give one of my lecturettes on how asking questions is important and there is no shame in it and that if you do say "I do not understand" you are being courageous.

I will say: "Who still does not understand?" There are those who consistently take this opportunity to stay with me and ask more questions. After some new ways of delivering the directions it is clear that some of the children had in fact understood and were somehow not ready to go off and begin. James, Ben, Mandy, Sandy are among them.

2-13-97
After giving directions, but right before sending the children off to do a task, usually math, I have been in the habit of asking "who thinks they cannot do this?" I have been writing down names

and keeping a close eye on these individuals. This has been a method I have chosen to identify those "helpless" children that I am most interested in. Over time I have discovered five children who consistently raise their hands when asked. It is surprising that they self-disclose as they do given their responses on the questionnaires and the fact that the whole class is watching and that they would seemingly be most likely to care what others think. Perhaps they trust the class and me enough.

1-27-98
I have become ultra conscious of how I give directions. I think of every move I make, my tone, my words, my focus on individuals. I check in with those I know may not get it. I tell some to sit up front. I announce to the class that I am about to give directions. I wait. When I am through I now say "if you understand, you can go to it." This is a change from before where I would have everyone stay. This approach takes away from the public element of asking for help. Few remain and it is a cozy little group. Last year it seemed that I may have inadvertently developed a culture of helplessness around these issues of asking questions. I made a point of asking "who thinks they can't do this?" At the time I thought I was doing something good, something that would give me data and help the kids at the same time. I now think that that triggered the helpless response and permitted the kids who were inclined to do so, to stay and ask questions and avoid the work at hand.

The words used by a teacher hold great power for a child. The way a task is introduced will impact the degree of effort and persistence that a child exhibits. Likewise, the words a child uses during the course of a task reflect his/her own internal learning beliefs, and these, in turn will dictate the course of action taken.

One of the words most often heard and thought in a classroom is "**hard**." I think that the word's presence offers much fuel to the fire of giving up and feeling unmotivated. It is ambiguous and misunderstood. "Hard" plays two roles: 1. A task is **hard, too hard, or not hard enough.** For some, if the task is "hard" it is impossible. For others if the task is hard it is challenging. These children fit with Dweck's notion of learning goals. 2. **Working hard.** It implies effort. Would we write a sentence like this: "I am working hard on this work because it is hard?" Confusing, and used in so many ways, the word *hard* needs explicit clarity in the classroom. As a matter of fact, if a teacher introduces a task by saying "this is hard," it triggers the helpless response in some and they give up before they start. I always ask children: "Is it hard or too hard?" I think it comes down to each individual child's definition of the word hard. If the belief is that hard means too hard, then will this child work hard. Hard already has a negative connotation for this child, so what would working hard mean? Probably something negative. If, to another, the word hard means challenge as a positive trait, this child will probably work hard, liking the challenge.

One way that I differentiate between "hard" and "too hard" is by asking: "Do you think you can do it or do you <u>know</u> you can't?"

Asking questions is a category of behavior that crosses over from public to private with teacher to task related. Either asking questions as a means of avoidance or not asking both provide evidence of

obstacles to effort and persistence. A child may believe that "if I ask a lot of questions I won't have to begin. I need to ask a lot of questions to be sure I know what to do because I feel very uncertain about whether or not I could do this. I won't ask any questions because I will be perceived as dumb" (by teacher and/or peers - if public).

12-4-97
James: I don't understand where the boxes are (to put his homework in)

Mr. J: Yes you do. (He did)

James expresses doubts, hesitations, and says I don't understand when he is not absolutely certain that he does understand. I wonder what the real evidence needs to be for him to not need to ask. The asking seems to be the need for reassurance. He needs to engage. He has a hard time moving forward on his own.

2. While Beginning A Task

Some of the inner monologues occuring in children's minds at this time are:

"I can't do it, I'm afraid of failure/mistakes so I'll avoid it, ask questions, go to the bathroom, sharpen pencil, lose my work, stay disorganized."

"This is going to be hard." "This is easy."

If a task does not give an individual a feeling of developing competence it will not activate the competence motivation drive. This may be the most fundamental axiom of competence motivation. (Stipek, 1988). When a teacher says "this is going to be easy" a child with learning goals can easily become unmotivated, feeling that there is going to be no challenge. Likewise, a child with performance goals will see an easy task as an opportunity to exhibit smartness. Either way, the "easy" comment can signal to a child that the teacher does not believe the child has the ability to do harder work. It follows that saying "this is going to be hard" will trigger the helpless response from entity children, and a possible sense of positive challenge from incremental types.

3. While Engaged In A Task

How does a child decide that they can't do it? What criteria do they use and how do they evaluate their ability against that criteria?

Children exhibit varying forms of motivation and avoidance in the classroom. Some look real when they are not. Some are not what they seem to be. Internally, children continually measure their successes and failures using their own unique set of measuring devices. The words they use, the public forum, and the teacher all contribute to both how they measure, and how that measure will change (or not) in the future.

11-25-97
How many fingers are there in the class? Shonna was using Dienes Blocks (base ten blocks) to count 10's, one ten per kid in class. She was placing them on a class list in a one-to-one correspondence. 180....190...

Melissa (Intern): "It's a hard one."

Shonna backs off at the words looking doubtful.

4. While Completing A Task

Some believe that they have not achieved success unless they "get it all right." Some will not complete tasks. They give up, throw away their papers and start over again, saying: "This is no good."

11-20-97
Yesterday we were doing an activity that I call Challenge Yourself in which the children are given 50 simple math facts to do in 10 minutes. they are to determine their goals (both time to complete and number correct based on past performance).

Shonna got 32 correct.

I went over to her and in a delighted tone said:

"You got 32 right? So many more than last time. Last time you got 14 and this time 32. How did you improve so much?

Shonna: "I didn't copy anyone."

I was puzzled, or should I say saddened by her response. Of course I remembered our previous conversation in which she had, in fact, just copied another's math. But today she achieved something great. My attempt to celebrate this accomplishment with her turned into her feeling accused. Definitely defensive. Perhaps Shonna does not think that I, and others, perceive her to be capable of succeeding on her own?

2-3-98
We had just completed the pretest for spelling. Shonna told me that she got all ten words correct. To her I made a big deal of it. In my mind I was suspicious. Did she copy? How did she do this? Is she really able? To really find out I playfully gave her a little oral respelling. She was able to spell every word correctly. I was thrilled. Also internally embarrassed that I had doubted her. In the past she had copied others believing she could not do it alone. this time I thought the same. It wonder if children's beliefs about themselves affect how we think of them? It seems to have influenced me here.

3-5-98
We are about to begin our final spelling test (we have a pretest earlier in the week and then have practice skills, then a final test)

Shonna has a list of the words crumpled and hidden in her hand. She is not hiding it well, which I find interesting. Perhaps she wants me to know that she is going to commit this violation. Later, I try to have one of my talks with her about how achievement and success are not simply by the number one gets right but by effort. I don't think I'm getting through to her. She genuinely seems to feel that if she got a 10 (all right) using her method, it would be equally as successful. I wonder if I am getting through on some level? I wonder if she really believes what she said. I hope not but am afraid she does. Even morally this disturbs me.

Conclusion

Teaching is a delicate job. Children who are less motivated are a great challenge to teach. Working with them and changing their beliefs is a process. Luckily there is much fine research that offers direction. It is my job as teacher/researcher to interpret and implement these findings. This is where I am now on the journey. The challenge is to create a classroom in which all children operate within a "learning goals" orientation. They see learning as an incremental process.

My journey as teacher/researcher continues to be guided by the children's voices, for what they think, say, and do is a reflection of their own motivation to learn.

There are several salient areas in which I am presently placing my focus:

- GOALS SETTING - One of my challenges is to train children how to set clear. measurable, achievable academic (and behavioral) goals. Goal setting becomes a vehicle whereby one can measure success, improvement, effort and persistence.

- ATTRIBUTION RETRAINING - How do my students explain their success and failures? Do they attribute them to luck, effort, ability, and/or difficulty of task? In teaching children to rethink their attributions I am retraining their minds, giving them the understanding that they are what they think. The goal is to help children link the understanding that effort and persistence brings success/learning.

- PARENT/TEACHER - I am learning effective means to help parents become oriented towards achievement. The messages that parents convey to their children are critical in the attitudes that the children develop towards school (Bempechat (1998).

- DISCIPLINE - Discipline starts from the outside (teacher) and evolves to the inner (self). Children need external discipline to set the parameters of what is expected, what the standards are, what is acceptable behavior, and in forming excellent work habits.

- COOPERATIVE LEARNING - In using cooperative learning structures I have witnessed children enjoying learning, experiencing less public learning (they work in small groups), and since others depend on their contributions, it is likely they will be encouraged by their peers to persist in the face of obstacles.

- THE CULTURE OF LEARNING - Safety, wait time think time, incremental atmosphere, eliminating competition and comparing: the learning atmosphere in the classroom establishes the setting for learning. The degree of safety, respect, and well-being that a child experiences will establish a huge support for learning.

- CURRICULUM - The curriculum is the "stuff" that is learned. I attempt to give children opportunities to build knowledge and enjoy learning by providing projects and approaches that stimulate thinking and are enjoyable.

The measures of success come in many forms. Children need evidence that they have learned something. My daughter has said many times "I learned about the ocean in kindergarten." She has learned many things, but this stays with her because it is knowledge, something concrete, tangible, and repeatable.

Do children want to change? I believe that they certainly do, but first they need: 1- to realize that there is something that is in need of change. 2 - proof that there is something in need of change. 3- proof that there is something to change to. 4- to be offered help. 5- to make a personal and conscious decision to change.

As long as children experience Public Performance Anxiety and see the teacher as the punisher and judge, they are focused on the external. We need to turn them within, to refocus their attention to their own efforts and abilities (smartness), to help them to stay and/or get internally motivated.

Children can and do change their learning behaviors. Change is measured by improvement. Improvement is achieved through effort . Achievement increases self esteem.

The patterns of our behavior prevent us from change. Everything we do is either a consciously intentional change or it is old behavior dictated by a pattern.

I imagine that for some children with performance goals, attempting a task, or deciding whether to participate in a group learning situation is like anticipating a jump into a cold lake. They assume that it is going to be painful, they are not sure if they want to try, and are tempted to give up. Will she jump in? What will prevail; the obstacles? the will to learn?

6-19-97

Brenda's Change

Brenda is an important footnote in this research. She is one of the children who exhibited the helpless pattern. On the first day of second grade I called Brenda over to me and she nervously asked: "Am I in trouble?" She was always worried at the beginning of math work. She asked questions and showed much resistance to beginning, and to trying. She cried during the IOWA Tests (standardized tests). Brenda changed.

Gradually I noticed Brenda taking risks. She raised her hand more. She asked fewer "worry" questions. She noticed her successes and saw more of her struggles as work and opportunity rather than failure. I was thrilled with what I saw. She had gotten it. Perhaps my many talks with her, support, touch, eye contact made a difference? Who knows.

I talked with Brenda about this. I told her I noticed a change and asked her if she had. She acknowledged that she had and that she had decided to be different.

We both agreed that we would share this story with the class, which we did. Some of her classmates had said that they, too, had noticed a change in Brenda.

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